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## **Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals : Associations With Well-Being in Unmarried and Married Couples**

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## Research Report

# Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused and Prevention-Focused Goals

## Associations With Well-Being in Unmarried and Married Couples

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**ABSTRACT**—*Perceived emotional support from close relationship partners in times of stress is a major predictor of well-being. However, recent research has suggested that, beyond emotional support, perceived support for achieving personal goals is also important for well-being. The present study extends such research by demonstrating that associations of perceived goal support with well-being differ depending on how people represent their goals and the general motivational context in which they pursue these goals. Among unmarried romantic partners, for whom the context of the relationship presumably is largely attainment oriented, perceived support for attainment-relevant (or promotion-focused) goals independently predicted relationship and personal well-being, whereas perceived support for maintenance-relevant (or prevention-focused) goals did not. In contrast, among married partners, for whom the context of the relationship presumably is both attainment and maintenance oriented, perceived support for both promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals independently predicted well-being. We discuss the implications for forecasting and improving well-being among married couples.*

The relationships that people form have profound influences on their psychological functioning. One primary source of this influence is the support that their relationship partners provide

through the setbacks and triumphs they regularly experience. Indeed, this perceived support is among the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction, happiness, and overall well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Myers, 1992; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988).

Research on social support and well-being has often focused on perceived emotional support in times of stress (Cutrona, 1996; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). However, recent studies have also explored the role of perceived support from romantic partners in achieving personal goals. Feeney (2004) showed that perceived encouragement from romantic partners while discussing personal goals predicts immediate increases in self-esteem, positive mood, and beliefs that these goals are achievable. Brunstein, Dangelmayer, and Schultheiss (1996) further showed that feeling that romantic partners understand and assist in goal pursuit predicts increased positive mood and greater progress toward goal completion 4 weeks later (see also Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988). Drigotas and his colleagues (Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999) even demonstrated that the belief that a romantic partner affirms and elicits one's personal aspirations predicts increased relationship well-being, increased personal well-being, and perceived attainment of these aspirations several months later.

Thus, perceived support for personal goals also appears to make important contributions to well-being. However, much research has shown that not all goals are created equal. The distinct goals people adopt, and their distinct representations of these goals, can fundamentally alter goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Higgins, 1997; Molden & Dweck, 2006). The study described here integrated research on perceived support for personal goals and research on goal-pursuit processes to investigate

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how perceptions of romantic partners' support for different kinds of personal goals differentially influence well-being.

### PROMOTION-FOCUSED AND PREVENTION-FOCUSED GOAL PURSUIT

Goals differ in many ways, but psychologists have long made a distinction between those primarily focused on advancement, growth, and development and those primarily focused on security, safety, and protection (Maslow, 1955). Building on this distinction, Higgins (1997) proposed not only that concerns with advancement versus security define different types of goals, but also that people represent and experience advancement-oriented goals (*promotion concerns*) differently than security-oriented goals (*prevention concerns*).

Promotion concerns revolve around *attainment*; they are represented as pursuing hopes and aspirations that ensure advancement and are experienced as accomplishing positive outcomes (i.e., gains; Higgins, 1997). In contrast, prevention concerns revolve around *maintenance*; they are represented as upholding responsibilities and obligations that are necessary to ensure security and are experienced as ensuring protection from negative outcomes (i.e., nonlosses; Higgins, 1997). When people are focused on promotion, they favor attaining new achievements over maintaining current achievements, value goals involving attainment or outcomes perceived as gains, and persist on tasks in which success promises rewards. In contrast, when people are focused on prevention, they favor maintaining current achievements over attaining new achievements, value goals involving maintenance or outcomes perceived as protecting against losses, and persist on tasks in which success promises safety from penalties (Brodscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; see Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

### EXPERIENCES OF GOAL SUPPORT IN UNMARRIED AND MARRIED COUPLES

Because promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals evoke different representations and experiences, associations between well-being and perceived support for these distinct goals may further depend on one's relationship with the partner providing the support. Studies have shown that the specific person providing support and the match between the support provided and one's current needs affect how this support influences well-being (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Dakoff & Taylor, 1990). Similarly, we hypothesize that associations of well-being with support for different types of goals may also vary by the broader motivational context of the relationship. Perceived support for one's own promotion-focused or prevention-focused goals may have a

higher correspondence with well-being in relationship contexts that generally evoke promotion or prevention concerns.

People tend to view both aspirations and responsibilities as highly important, and all close relationships involve some concerns with both advancement and security. Therefore, correlations between well-being and perceived support for both promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals should exist across most relationship contexts. However, we propose that the motivational context of relationships between unmarried romantic partners is predominantly attainment focused (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Unmarried partners may primarily evaluate their relationship in terms of how it is advancing and whether intimacy and interdependence are growing and developing. Within this attainment-oriented (promotion-focused) relationship context, partners could thus experience perceived support for their own generally promotion-focused goals (hopes, aspirations) as particularly relevant for their personal well-being and the well-being of their relationship. Furthermore, given this largely attainment-focused context, unmarried partners may be relatively less mindful of the security that their relationship provides and the more maintenance-oriented (prevention-focused) investments they are making in their relationship. Unmarried partners could thus experience support for their own generally prevention-focused goals (responsibilities, obligations) as less relevant for well-being than support for their promotion-focused goals. That is, for these individuals, perceived support for fulfilling prevention-focused goals may seem less central to the larger motivational context of the relationship than other concerns, and may thus be less associated with well-being.

In contrast, we propose that the motivational context of relationships between married partners is broader and more maintenance focused than the motivational context of relationships between unmarried couples (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Once married, people's investments in their partner (both materially and psychologically) increase dramatically, and they become more centrally dependent on this relationship for fulfilling their needs (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, although they continue to evaluate whether their spouse is someone with whom their intimacy can grow, married individuals may also more thoroughly evaluate their relationship in terms of the security it provides and the investments they are maintaining. Within this increasingly maintenance-oriented relationship context, perceived support for prevention-focused goals may seem just as centrally relevant for the relationship, and be just as strongly associated with well-being, as perceived support for promotion-focused goals.

Therefore, we hypothesize that, when considering the independent influences of perceived support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals, perceived support for promotion-focused goals should predict higher relationship and personal well-being among unmarried partners, but support for prevention-focused goals should not. In contrast, perceived support for

**TABLE 1**  
**Items Used to Measure Perceived Goal Support**

Support for promotion-focused goals	Support for prevention-focused goals
My partner thinks I excel at attaining my aspirations in life.	My partner thinks I excel at living up to the responsibilities to which I am committed.
My partner feels confident that I can fulfill my hopes and dreams.	My partner feels confident that I can fulfill the obligations to which I am dedicated.
My partner behaves in ways that help me fulfill my hopes and dreams.	My partner behaves in ways that help me live up to the obligations to which I am committed.
My partner elicits from me the person I aspire to be, in terms of hopes and accomplishments.	My partner elicits from me the person I think I ought to be, in terms of responsibilities and obligations.

**Note.** Perceived support was measured by participants' ratings of their agreement with these items. The rating scale ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 8 (*completely*).

both promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals should uniquely predict higher well-being among married partners.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 92 unmarried heterosexual couples and 77 married couples from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They were recruited through advertisements. On average, members of unmarried couples were 22.06 ( $SD = 3.62$ ) years old and had been together for 22.31 ( $SD = 18.24$ ) months. The majority of unmarried couples (58%) were cohabiting, and none had children. Most were Caucasian (72%; 5% African American, 16% Asian American, 3% Hispanic, and 4% other). They were well-educated (2% had postcollegiate degrees, 30% had college degrees, 37% had completed some college, and 31% had high school diplomas) and had a median individual income of \$15,000 to \$20,000 annually.

On average, members of married couples were 33.74 ( $SD = 10.75$ ) years old and had been married for 72.02 ( $SD = 104.46$ ) months. All married couples were cohabiting, and a minority (26%) had children. Most were Caucasian (81%; 9% African American, 2% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% other). They were highly educated (43% had postcollegiate degrees, 40% had college degrees, 10% had completed some college, and 7% had high school diplomas) and had a median individual income of \$20,000 to \$30,000 annually.

### Procedure

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires that included an eight-item assessment of perceived support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals (see Table 1). We examined associations between perceived goal support and both relationship well-being and personal well-being. Relationship well-being was assessed by reported trust in one's partner (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) and feelings of intimacy, satisfaction, and agreement with one's partner (i.e., *dyadic ad-*

*justment*; Spanier, 1976). Personal well-being was assessed by one's own *subjective well-being* (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Participants rated trust and subjective well-being on 8-point scales (0 = *low*, 8 = *high*) and rated dyadic adjustment on 141-point scales (0 = *low*, 141 = *high*). To ensure that associations of perceived support with well-being could be tested independently of other relationship processes that affect well-being, we also included measures of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) and anxious and avoidant attachment orientations (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). All questionnaires had high reliability within both the unmarried and married samples ( $\alpha$ s = .78–.94).

## RESULTS

Data from individual relationship partners were nested within couples; to account for this nonindependence, we employed multilevel regression analyses that modeled variance within couples and between couples simultaneously (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Following the recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) for the analysis of data within dyads, we modeled the intercept terms (i.e., the overall levels of support and well-being reported) as varying randomly across couples, but modeled the slope terms (i.e., the specific associations between support and well-being) as fixed effects across couples.

Table 2 displays mean scores for unmarried and married participants on all primary variables.<sup>1</sup> Table 3 displays the simple, zero-order associations of perceived support for promotion-focused or prevention-focused goals with measures of relationship and personal well-being for unmarried and married participants. As expected, both types of perceived support generally predicted higher well-being among both married and unmarried couples.

<sup>1</sup>Data from a separate sample of unmarried and married individuals revealed no general differences by marital status in people's individual promotion or prevention motivations,  $ts(575) < 1.47$ ,  $ps > .14$  (Molden, Strachman, & Finkel, 2008).

TABLE 2

*Mean Ratings of Perceived Support for Promotion-Focused Goals, Perceived Support for Prevention-Focused Goals, Trust, Dyadic Adjustment, and Subjective Well-Being*

Measure	Unmarried couples	Married couples
Perceived support for promotion-focused goals	6.64 (1.04)	6.46 (1.33)
Perceived support for prevention-focused goals	6.64 (1.01)	6.59 (1.14)
Trust	6.29 (1.10)	6.39 (1.33)
Dyadic adjustment	92.86 (11.89)	107.14 (15.73)
Subjective well-being	6.14 (1.06)	6.28 (1.27)

**Note.** Participants responded on 8-point scales for all variables except dyadic adjustment, for which participants responded on a 141-point scale. Unmarried and married participants did not differ significantly in their overall levels of perceived support, trust, or subjective well-being, but did differ significantly in their dyadic-adjustment ratings,  $t(166) = 7.20, p < .001$ . In both samples, dyadic adjustment was assessed using a 30-item measure that eliminated 2 items from the standard questionnaire (i.e., agreement between partners concerning “handling family finances” and “household tasks”) that may not have been equally applicable for unmarried couples. Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

To further examine how different types of perceived support were uniquely related to well-being for unmarried and married couples, we conducted regressions in which perceived support for promotion-focused and prevention-focused goals were entered simultaneously as predictors, along with relationship status (0 = *unmarried*, 1 = *married*), Status  $\times$  Promotion Support, and Status  $\times$  Prevention Support terms. We proposed that variations in associations of perceived support with well-being are related to variations in the specific motivational context of relationships between unmarried and married partners. However, demographic differences between unmarried and married individuals might alter the context of these relationships in many other ways. To control for such demographic differences, we added variables representing age, income, education level, cohabitation, and number of children to the regression models. Finally, a variable representing gender was included as well.<sup>2</sup>

Results presented in Figures 1 through 3 illustrate that none of the Status  $\times$  Promotion Support interactions were significant ( $ts < 1.20, ps > .26$ ). These findings indicated that such support was not differentially associated with well-being for unmarried

and married partners. However, analyses revealed significant (or marginally significant) Status  $\times$  Prevention Support interactions for trust,  $\beta = .38, t(136) = 2.19, p = .03$ ; dyadic adjustment,  $\beta = .21, t(135) = 1.73, p = .09$ ; and subjective well-being,  $\beta = .32, t(137) = 1.95, p = .05$ . These findings indicated that associations of perceived support for prevention-focused goals with well-being were indeed stronger for married than unmarried partners. The follow-up simple-effects analyses within each relationship type, shown in Table 4, further revealed that, whereas perceived support for promotion-focused goals independently predicted higher well-being among both unmarried and married partners, perceived support for prevention-focused goals independently predicted higher well-being only among married partners. When we controlled for possible psychological (rather than demographic) differences between unmarried and married partners, including self-esteem and attachment orientations, our results were virtually identical (although independent associations between perceived promotion support and subjective well-being dropped to marginal significance).

## DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, associations of perceived support for personal goals with relationship and individual well-being depended on the type of goals that were supported and the relationship within which support occurred. Support for attainment-oriented (promotion-focused) goals and support for maintenance-oriented (prevention-focused) goals each showed a simple association with well-being among both unmarried and married romantic partners. However, for unmarried partners, whose relationships are presumably more attainment oriented than maintenance oriented (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), perceived support for promotion-focused personal goals independently predicted greater well-being, but perceived support for prevention-focused personal goals did not. In contrast, among married partners, whose relationships are presumably equally attainment and maintenance oriented (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), perceived support for both promotion- and prevention-focused personal goals independently predicted well-being.

Previous research has typically found that unmarried and married partners show similar associations between perceived support for personal goals and well-being (Brunstein et al., 1996; Drigotas, 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999; Feeney, 2004). However, our findings suggest that perceived support for growth-oriented goals and attaining one's own aspirations may predict well-being only when it occurs within a relationship context emphasizing attainment (as is often equally true of married and unmarried romantic partnerships), whereas perceived support for security-oriented goals and maintaining one's own obligations may predict well-being only when it occurs within a relationship context emphasizing maintenance (as is often more true of married partnerships than unmarried partnerships). Furthermore, although past research has demonstrated that

<sup>2</sup>Analyses including Status  $\times$  Age, Age  $\times$  Promotion Support, Age  $\times$  Prevention Support, Status  $\times$  Gender, Gender  $\times$  Promotion Support, and Gender  $\times$  Prevention Support interaction terms revealed that none of these terms were significant. Thus, these interaction terms were dropped from the regression equation. Relationship duration was recorded as months exclusively dating for unmarried partners, but as months married for married partners; thus, this variable could not be included in the overall regression model. However, including duration in separate analyses conducted within each relationship type did not alter any of the results reported, nor did duration significantly moderate associations between support for promotion- or prevention-focused goals and well-being for either unmarried or married partners.



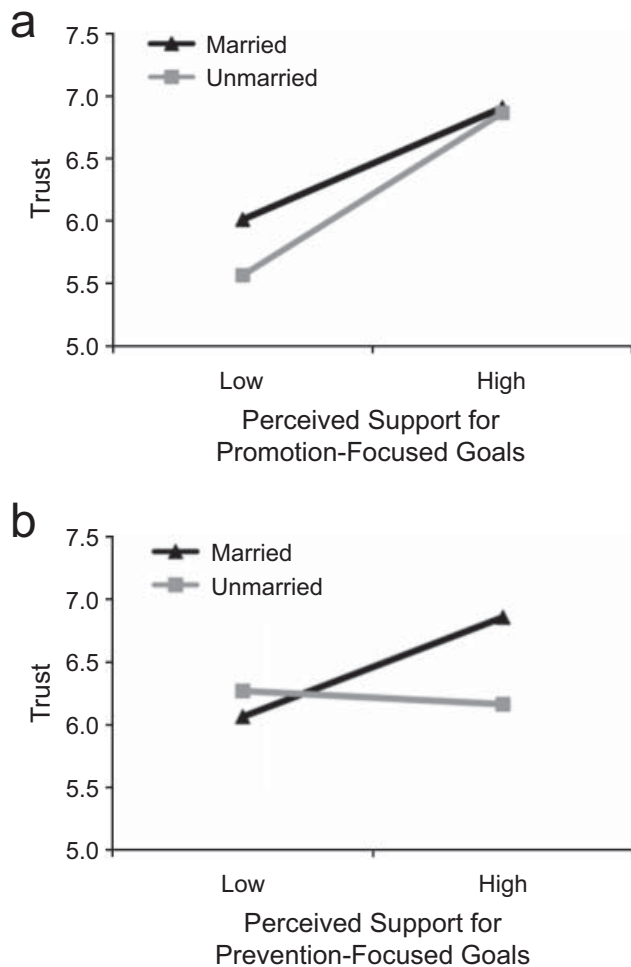
**TABLE 3**

*Zero-Order Associations Between Perceived Goal Support and Trust, Dyadic Adjustment, and Subjective Well-Being Among Married and Unmarried Couples*

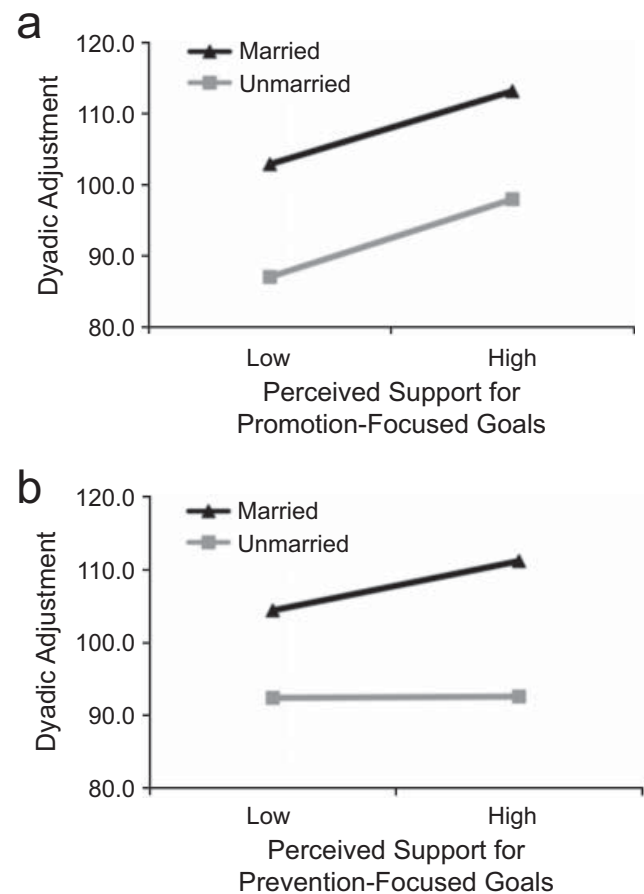
Measure	Unmarried couples				Married couples			
	Perceived support for promotion-focused goals		Perceived support for prevention-focused goals		Perceived support for promotion-focused goals		Perceived support for prevention-focused goals	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
Trust	.54	8.29***	.43	6.82***	.58	9.16***	.59	8.55***
Dyadic adjustment	.34	7.87***	.28	6.98***	.51	9.36***	.46	8.05***
Subjective well-being	.39	5.33***	.33	4.85***	.45	6.87***	.50	7.34***

**Note.** We calculated the zero-order associations of perceived support for promotion-focused goals with well-being and the zero-order associations of perceived support for prevention-focused goals with well-being in individual multilevel regression analyses. Analyses were performed separately within the samples of unmarried and married participants. There were 91 degrees of freedom for all of the analyses in the unmarried sample, 73 degrees of freedom for the analyses involving trust and subjective well-being in the married sample, and, because of missing data, 71 degrees of freedom for the analyses of dyadic adjustment in the married sample.

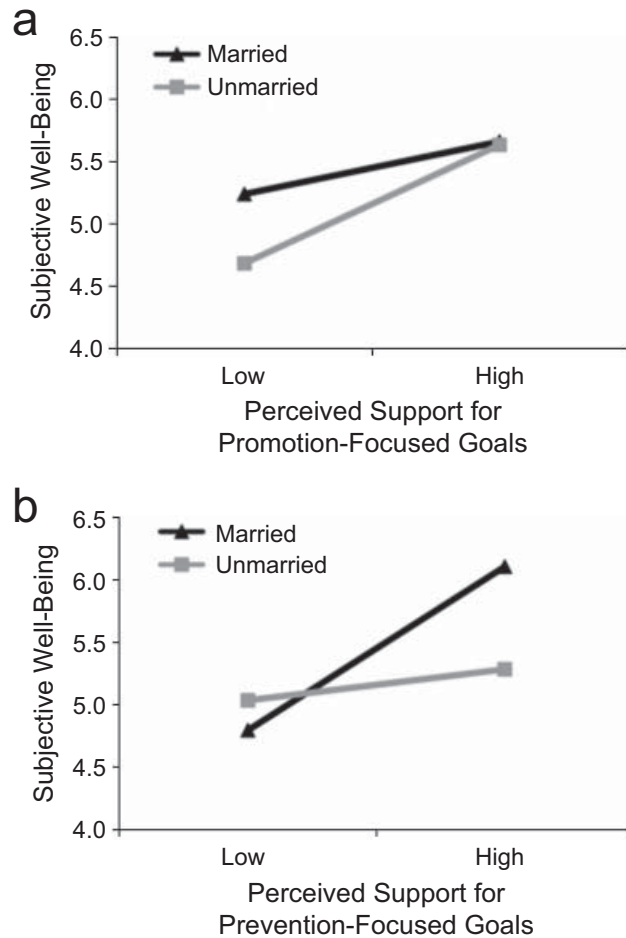
\*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 1.** Trust in one's romantic partner among married and unmarried couples as a function of perceived support for personal goals. Results are shown separately for (a) promotion-focused and (b) prevention-focused personal goals. Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 standard deviation above and below the means of these variables.



**Fig. 2.** Dyadic adjustment among married and unmarried couples as a function of perceived support for personal goals. Results are shown separately for (a) promotion-focused and (b) prevention-focused personal goals. Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 standard deviation above and below the means of these variables.



**Fig. 3.** Subjective well-being among married and unmarried couples as a function of perceived support for personal goals. Results are shown separately for (a) promotion-focused and (b) prevention-focused personal goals. Predicted values for high and low support were calculated at 1 standard deviation above and below the means of these variables.

associations of perceived support with well-being differ by the specific kind of support people currently desire (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), the current study expands this perspective by illustrating how the broader motivational contexts that relationships create, and the various types of goals that relationship partners may support, also play a role in determining such associations.

The present research is limited by its reliance on cross-sectional samples, but it still has implications for how well-being might change as couples transition from romantic partners to spouses. The finding that perceived support for prevention-focused goals is an independent predictor of well-being among married partners suggests that people considering marriage could increasingly contemplate concerns about relationship maintenance and reevaluate their partner in terms of perceived support for such goals. Thus, such support may uniquely predict which couples decide to marry. Alternatively, people may only begin to evaluate their well-being in terms of perceived support for prevention-focused goals after they marry. Thus, such support may instead uniquely predict how satisfied spouses are and whether they remain married. In either case, encouraging couples to consider the support they receive for both their promotion-focused and their prevention-focused goals before marriage could potentially reduce the likelihood of divorce. Longitudinal research spanning the transition to marriage could provide further insight on this question.

To conclude, the present study demonstrates that support for different types of goals predicts well-being in different relational contexts. Additional research integrating the literatures on goal pursuit and social support could produce further insights into the crucial role of social relationships in psychological functioning.

**TABLE 4**

*Independent Associations Between Perceived Goal Support and Trust, Dyadic Adjustment, and Subjective Well-Being Among Married and Unmarried Couples*

Measure	Unmarried couples				Married couples			
	Perceived support for promotion-focused goals		Perceived support for prevention-focused goals		Perceived support for promotion-focused goals		Perceived support for prevention-focused goals	
	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$	$\beta$	$t$
Trust	.52	4.25***	.02	0.15	.40	4.03***	.25	2.33*
Dyadic adjustment	.27	3.32***	.08	1.05	.37	4.47***	.20	2.36*
Subjective well-being	.30	2.16*	.10	0.77	.21	2.01*	.34	3.14**

**Note.** We calculated the independent associations of perceived support for promotion-focused goals with well-being and the independent associations of perceived support for prevention-focused goals with well-being in simultaneous multilevel regression analyses. Analyses were performed separately within the samples of unmarried and married participants. There were 90 degrees of freedom for all of the analyses in the unmarried sample, 72 degrees of freedom for the analyses involving trust and subjective well-being in the married sample, and, because of missing data, 70 degrees of freedom for the analysis of dyadic adjustment in the married sample.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



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